



Hewitt Associates

on Flexible Compensation

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Revised

Outlook p.1
Flexible program prevalence—
in words and pictures

This year marks the 10th anniversary of Section 125—the Internal Revenue Code provision that allows employees to take part in determining how employer dollars allocated for benefits will be spent on their behalf. During the past decade, the movement toward “choicemaking” systems has flourished—with more than 800 flexible programs expected to be on line by year-end 1988.

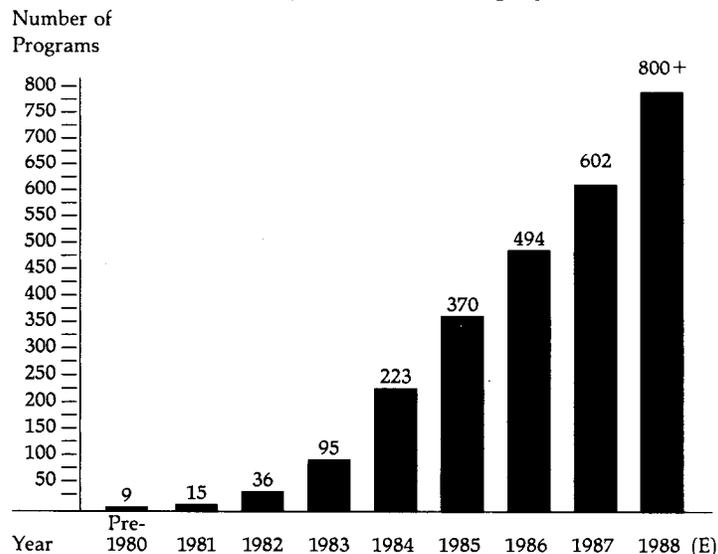
Spotlight p.3
A review of new flexible
programs at...

Here in words and pictures is an update on flexible program prevalence—by employer size, industry, and location. (Figures are compiled from published sources as well as our own consulting experience.) The information is based on 602 programs in place through 1987 and another 46 with January 1, 1988 implementation dates—for a total of 648 programs currently in effect. The figures are intended to represent major U.S. employers with plans that either offer some form of choicemaking in employee benefits, or a flexible spending account (or both).

- Abbott Laboratories
- Federal Paper Board Company
- Finnigan Corporation
- Florida Steel
- Hershey Foods
- Mattel
- Rohm & Haas
- Scott Paper
- Wausau Paper Mills
- First Pennsylvania
- National Westminster
- Valley National Corporation
- Beth Israel Hospital
- New England Deaconess Hospital
- Porter Memorial Hospital
- St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital
- Sisters of Charity
of the Incarnate Word
- W.A. Foote Memorial Hospital
- Florida Power
- NICOR Oil & Gas
- Pacific Resources
- Texas Eastern
- United Gas Pipe Line Company
- Arthur Young
- University of Puget Sound
- Applied Physics Laboratory

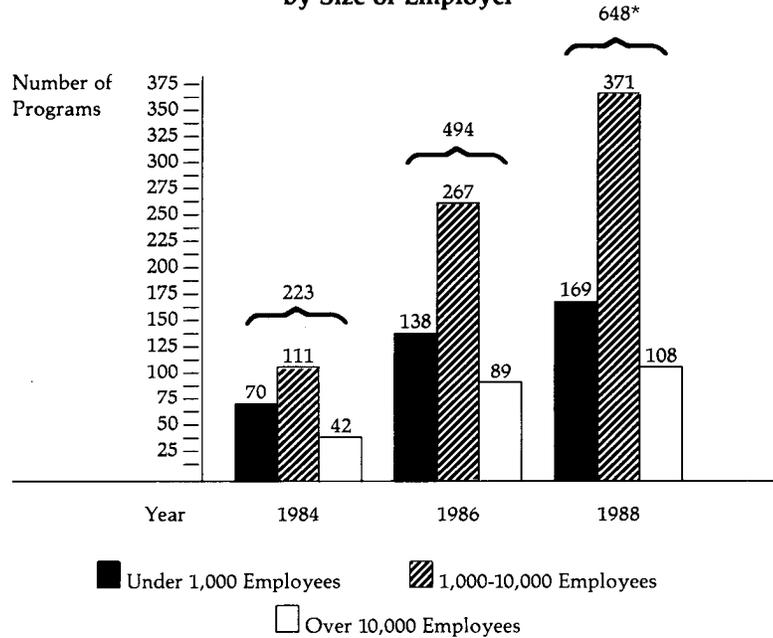
Viewpoint p.11
Closure on the battle
against the \$500 cap

**Flexible Compensation Programs
Among Major U.S. Employers**



Flexible compensation programs have been implemented by companies of all sizes, but most of the recent growth has been fueled by the "medium" size organizations—those with 1,000 to 10,000 employees.

**Flexible Compensation Programs
by Size of Employer**

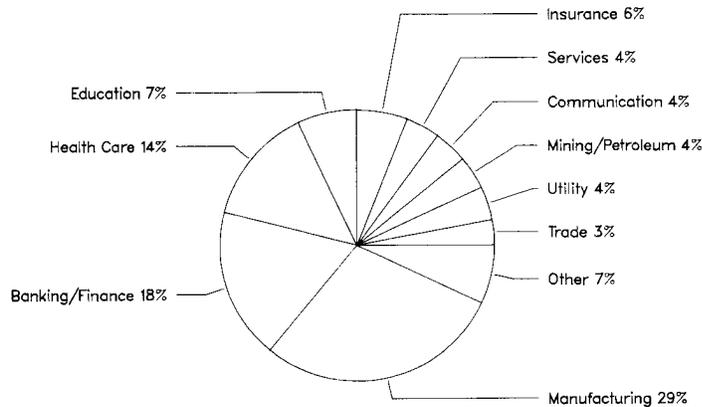


* Based on flexible compensation programs in effect by January 1.

Among the very largest industrial companies in the country, 27% of the Fortune 100 and 16% of the Fortune 500 had flexible programs in effect by January 1. On the service side, 20% of the Fortune 500 service companies had implemented programs by January 1, including 44% of the 100 largest commercial banks, 26% of the 50 largest life insurance companies, 22% of the 50 largest utilities, and 12% of the 50 largest savings institutions.

By industry, flexible programs are well represented across industry lines, but larger concentrations of programs are found among manufacturing firms, banking and financial institutions, and health care organizations.

Flexible Compensation Programs by Industry*
(Percent of Companies)



* Total—648 flexible compensation programs in effect.

By state, the "Top 10" for flexible compensation include Illinois (63 programs), California (50), Minnesota (50), New York (48), Texas (46), Ohio (32), Pennsylvania (32), Michigan (30), Massachusetts (27), and Colorado (26).

Spotlight

Employers continue to implement flexible compensation programs—driven by different objectives and surrounded by unique circumstances. Following is a sampling of employers—by general industry groupings— who launched flexible compensation programs, effective January 1.

■ Manufacturing

Abbott Laboratories, the world-wide health care products company based in North Chicago, Illinois, launched a flexible benefit program for more than 22,000 employees across the country. Introduction of the program represents a "return to basics" in health care benefits, according to Henry Weishaar, Divisional Vice President, Corporate Personnel. "Through our plan design and communication, we're emphasizing that the real purpose of benefit coverage is to help protect employees from catastrophic expenses," explains Mr. Weishaar.

The new flexible program includes choices in medical and dental, plus health and dependent care spending accounts. In the area of medical, the program offers four indemnity plan options, HMOs, and the opportunity to waive coverage. (To reassure employees that benefit coverage was not being cut back, Abbott retained the company's prior plan as an option.) The indemnity plan options are structured in a relatively unusual manner—as the deductible rises, annual out-of-pocket limits decrease and lifetime maximums increase. In other words, as employees take on more risk for front-end costs, Abbott provides greater protection for major, long-term medical expenses.

Enrollment results indicate that employees took an active interest in evaluating and selecting the medical coverage best suited to their needs. Only 42% of employees elected the prior plan; 44% elected coverage under one of the three new indemnity options; and the balance enrolled in HMOs, waived coverage, or were covered as a dependent of another Abbott employee.

Federal Paper Board Company, Inc., a forest products manufacturer located in Montvale, New Jersey, implemented a flexible program to provide a uniform benefit structure for 1,300 salaried employees.

Prior to the new flexible program, all employees had common benefits except in medical. The company had taken the first steps toward cost sharing a few years ago by offering a comprehensive medical plan (\$100 deductible) for new hires, employees of a recently acquired paper mill, and other employees wishing to switch out of the old first-dollar medical plan. (The first-dollar plan was closed to all new employees when the new comprehensive plan went into effect.)

"The flexible program allowed us to offer the same benefit opportunities to all employees, with no cutbacks," notes Don Gardner, Vice President of Employee Relations. Under the new flexible program, the company maintained both of the previous medical plans, but added another comprehensive option (\$300 deductible). The old comprehensive plan serves as the core plan, which is completely subsidized by the company. Employees may opt up to the

first-dollar plan (and pay the higher cost), or down to the new comprehensive option (which produces a rebate). In addition to choices in medical, the program features health and dependent care spending accounts.

Over the last decade, benefit costs had tripled for **Finnigan Corporation**, a manufacturer of analytical and scientific instruments with 500 salaried employees based in San Jose, California. The company implemented a flexible program to help manage benefit costs more effectively in the future, as well as to respond to employees' changing needs.

The flexible program offers choices in medical, dental, long-term disability, life, and paid time off (vacation and sick leave combined), plus health and dependent care spending accounts. Although employees had the opportunity to buy back former coverages, enrollment results indicated that only 8% elected to do so.

"Keeping track of claims experience is an important part of our effort to manage costs," explains Russell Williams, International Compensation and Benefits Manager. "Our PC solution enabled us to automate the benefit administration function and to generate reports that track plan costs and experience on an ongoing basis. Through our new capabilities, we'll be better equipped to plan for cost effectiveness down the road."

In designing and implementing its flexible program, Tampa-based **Florida Steel Corporation** with 2,400 employees, faced the challenge of introducing employee cost sharing in medical for the first time. "From a cost management perspective, we recognized the need to break from our tradition of completely noncontributory medical coverage," comments Jim Hogue, Vice President, Employee Relations. "But as a union-free employer, we were sensitive to a change that might create negative employee reactions." The solution? The company retained its prior medical plan as a flexible option (at no cost to employees) and added two new, lower-coverage options. Employees who opt down in coverage receive higher flexible credits. The program also offers choices in dental and group life, plus health and dependent care spending accounts.

"Offering a choicemaking program, rather than taking a tough stance on cost containment, was critical to gaining employee acceptance for the concept of cost sharing," notes Mr. Hogue. "That, coupled with a comprehensive communication campaign, actually served to enhance our employee relations."

Hershey Foods Corporation, headquartered in Hershey, Pennsylvania, introduced a flexible program to corporate staff employees as well as Hershey Chocolate U.S.A. salaried employees across the country—a total of over 2,500 employees. "Three major objectives were met by our flexible program," explains E. J. Collins, Benefits Planning Manager. "We wanted to introduce flexibility to meet the changing benefit needs of our employees, to standardize various options across the company, and to provide an equitable way for the company to share some of the increases we've been experiencing in benefit costs with employees—particularly in medical."

Hershey elected to implement a full flexible program with choicemaking among virtually all benefit areas, in addition to health and dependent care spending accounts, and vacation buying. "We'll look at adding other options, including our capital accumulation plan, at a later date," comments Mr. Collins. "For the time being, however, I'd say our employees understand the new program and the consensus is very positive."

With more than 75 married couples employed by Hershey, the company also faced an equity issue: Should employees who waive medical and/or dental coverage for themselves—but are covered as the spouse of another Hershey employee—receive the full opt-out credit allowance? Management decided that employees in this situation would be entitled to half as many credits as employees with health care coverage from another source.

Mattel Inc., a leading toy manufacturer located in Hawthorne, California, implemented a flexible program for nearly 2,000 salaried employees. The program includes choices in medical, dental and vision, supplemental life insurance, and health and dependent care spending accounts. Mattel plans to add choices in other benefit areas in future years.

"For the first time, we were asking employees to think about their benefits," notes John Thelen, Director of Compensation and Benefits. "The new flexible program gave us the opportunity to educate employees about the cost of health care, and provided a mechanism through which to manage costs."

Rohm & Haas Company, a multinational specialty chemical manufacturer based in Philadelphia, introduced a flexible program to increase the scope of benefit coverage for employees—with no incremental cost to the company. The program, which previously offered choices in medical, now also offers flexible spending accounts for health and dependent care. "Although our prior benefit package was quite competitive, the addition of spending accounts is providing employees even greater benefit value," comments Dan Kendall, Employee Benefits Manager.

Scott Paper Company, based in Philadelphia, introduced a broad choicemaking program to 6,000 employees in 23 locations across the country. In conjunction with numerous other changes, the company previously had implemented health and dependent care spending accounts. As one of many communication objectives on launching the new program, Scott sought to reinforce the usefulness and advantages of spending accounts. "Through an intensive communication effort, we emphasized the positive features of a choicemaking program, including the flexible spending accounts, and encouraged employees to take advantage of the program," notes Patrick Lawrence, Director of Employee Benefits. "A highlight of our election results was a tripling in employee participation in spending accounts from year-earlier levels, indicating that the quality of communication can make a difference."

According to Pamela Queoff, Director, Financial Analysis & Insurance, Wausau Paper Mills (WI) introduced a flexible benefit program for the "classic" purposes of providing employees the opportunity to select benefits to fit their individual needs and controlling long-term benefit costs. The program offers

broad choicemaking across benefit areas including medical, dental, group life, long-term disability, and vacation. Employees also may take unused flexible credits in cash, or direct that amount into a new 401(k) plan implemented along with the flexible program.

Separately, the paper manufacturer previously had maintained different plans for employees at each of two nearby operating plants and the new program has made it possible to offer comparable benefits to all employees.

• **Banking/Finance**

First Pennsylvania Bank, headquartered in Philadelphia, implemented a flexible program to enhance benefits for more than 3,300 full-time employees. In addition to providing the advantages of choice, the bank increased its financial commitment to benefits by 25% (exclusive of administration costs).

The flexible program includes eleven choices in medical (three comprehensive options, seven HMOs, and waiver of coverage), three in dental (two improved options and a waiver of coverage), eight choices in life insurance, and two in long-term disability. The program also includes new supplemental short-term disability coverage, restructured personal accident benefits, vacation buying and selling, plus health and dependent care spending accounts. Employees with unused "FlexDollars" may elect up to \$300 in cash.

Communication was viewed as an opportunity to build both enthusiasm for and understanding of the new program. Explains Bill Scott, Project Manager: "We built the communication campaign around the theme of 'Benefits Your Way' which allowed us to make learning about the new program a simple and enjoyable process. We used numerous communication media, including newsletters in the form of 'Travel Guides,' and an election workbook and video that made clever use of 'rules of the road' in explaining the different benefit choices."

Concludes Ron Boldt, Vice President of Compensation and Benefits: "We felt very positive about the new program and wanted to convey that enthusiasm through the communication material. In turn, our employees felt as good about the program as we did. Everyone came out a winner."

After studying alternative designs and conducting employee focus groups, **National Westminster Bank**, headquartered in New York City, introduced a flexible program that maintains the bank's traditionally strong financial commitment to benefits and responds to the feedback provided by employees.

"The bank was particularly interested in a flexible program as a strategic vehicle that would have appeal to an increasingly diverse workforce," explains Patricia Brown, Manager of Compensation and Benefits. "We wanted the program to be viewed as an exciting and positive change by our 4,600 employees." Adds Jeanne Ragonesi, Benefits Manager: "By planning ahead, we were able to separate our cost containment objectives from the new flexible program. Last year, we heightened employee awareness about the need to manage benefit costs by moving from a first-dollar medical plan to a comprehensive approach with managed care provisions. With that behind us, introduction of the flexible program was received most enthusiastically by our employees."

Under the flexible program, National Westminster retained the prior level of employer contribution, but made improvements by offering numerous choices in medical and dental, and by adding vision and hearing, survivor income, and supplemental short-term disability benefits, as well as health and dependent care spending accounts. To underscore the bank's recognition of the importance of benefits, the program contains no cash option.

A flexible approach is helping **Valley National Corporation**, a southwestern bank holding corporation headquartered in Phoenix, position its benefit program to accommodate future growth of the organization. By providing an "umbrella" benefit structure, the company hopes to facilitate future mergers and acquisitions.

This year, the program was extended to more than 8,500 employees, including 800 at the corporation's newest acquisition, Valley Utah Bank. The "umbrella" program offers a common benefit structure to which slight modifications (e.g., different premiums and deductibles) can be made to accommodate the special market circumstances of new acquisitions. The flexible program includes choices across benefit areas and health and dependent care spending accounts.

■ **Health Care**

Increased ability to recruit and retain employees as well as better control over benefit costs were the driving forces behind introduction of a flexible program at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, a Harvard-affiliated teaching hospital with more than 4,000 employees. "The current health care environment is very competitive," comments George Hunter, Compensation and Benefits Manager. "We're competing both with other hospitals and with private-sector employers in an era of staffing shortages and cost containment."

Through a flexible program, the hospital was able to maintain the same level of commitment to benefits while enhancing the overall value of the program. The hospital introduced choices in new benefit areas (dental, short-term disability, and flexible spending accounts) and added choices in existing benefit areas (medical, group life, AD&D, and long-term disability). "Employees are very pleased with the additional choices and the ability to influence how their benefit dollars are spent," adds Mr. Hunter.

New England Deaconess Hospital, also a Harvard-affiliated teaching hospital located in Boston, introduced "Deaconess FLEX," primarily to address diverse employee benefit needs and cost management issues. The flexible program offers the hospital's 2,300 employees a broad range of benefit choices, plus health and dependent care spending accounts. An added bonus on implementation of the new program was improvement in the efficiency of administrative procedures. "We examined various methods for administering the program—including the acquisition of a new payroll/personnel system with a module for flexible program administration," notes Mark Grubbs, Manager of Compensation and Benefits. "We decided on FlexSystem'PC, which allows computerized interface with our current mainframe payroll system for payroll deductions, data maintenance, and spending account recordkeeping. Overall, the system gives us quicker, easier access to data and greater control over information."

One of the issues **Porter Memorial Hospital** in Denver grappled with on introduction of their flexible program for 2,000 full- and part-time employees was incentives for use of Porter (and affiliated) hospitals versus other facilities. (Porter is a multi-purpose acute-care facility with services in a wide range of areas.) Design of the flexible program—which offers options in medical and dental plus health and dependent care spending accounts—encourages utilization of Porter facilities by providing 80% or 90% reimbursement (depending on option selected) for most services, versus 70% or 80% reimbursement on use of other providers.

St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital/Texas Heart Institute, one of the six hospitals located in the Texas Medical Center in Houston, launched a flexible program for 4,200 employees. The program offers broad choicemaking across benefit areas, as well as health and dependent care spending accounts. In the area of medical, the program offers three indemnity options and various HMOs. Although employees may not waive medical coverage, they may elect a low-cost, minimum-coverage plan. This option, which covers only 20% of medical expenses, is designed to supplement an employee's coverage from another source. "Many of our employees are from two-income households and have coverage available under a spouse's medical plan," notes Andy Brown, Benefits Manager. "Employees in this situation are able to elect the low-cost option and free up flexible credits for use in the spending accounts—or as a cash option."

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word Health Care System (SCH), based in Houston, designed a flexible program for 14,000 full- and part-time employees at 22 facilities in five states. The program offers broad choicemaking across benefit areas, as well as health and dependent care spending accounts. Gloria Ludtke, Corporate Director of Employee Benefits, explains, "We introduced flexible compensation primarily to provide employees at all facilities—large and small, rural and metropolitan—with a full range of benefit choices in a tax-effective manner. At the same time, local facility management gained tremendous flexibility in determining each year the level of employer contribution to the cost of the package based on local budget constraints and market needs."

At **W. A. Foote Memorial Hospital** in Jackson, Michigan, one of the key objectives for implementing a flexible program was to address inequities in benefit coverage for full- versus part-time employees. Part-time employees represent about one-third of the hospital's 1,600-employee work force. To distribute the employer contribution to benefits more equitably, the hospital decided to tie flexible credit allocations to its time and attendance system. All employees working at least 12 hours per week are eligible for the flexible program. At the beginning of the year, credit allocations are determined by the number of hours per week an employee is scheduled to work. However, because employees often end up working either more or fewer hours than scheduled, the hospital's payroll system monitors the actual number of hours worked and automatically adjusts credit allocations on an ongoing basis.

"We think—and employees seem to concur—that we've developed a very fair system," explains Jerry Culhane, Vice President, Human Resources. "We expect our flexible program to be an invaluable tool for recruiting and retaining employees."

▪ Energy

Florida Power Corporation, an electric utility based in St. Petersburg, Florida, introduced broad benefit choicemaking to about 3,400 salaried and 2,300 union employees after successfully implementing health and dependent care spending accounts in 1985. "Our philosophy has always called for providing the same benefits to all employees," explains George Rickus, Vice President, Human Resources. "So, when we decided to implement a flexible program, it was only natural to extend choicemaking to union as well as salaried employees."

The flexible program, which offers choices in medical, dental, group life, and long-term disability, allows employees to replicate prior benefit coverage. In fact, to ensure that the company's "no takeaway" posture was clear, enrollment materials were designed so employees could simply check a box to receive their prior standard benefit coverages. "This straight-forward approach helped us build credibility—especially with union employees," notes Mr. Rickus. "However, even with the same coverage available, we were pleased to see that about 80% of our employees elected to change their prior coverage in at least one benefit area."

Significant medical cost increases led **NICOR Oil & Gas Corporation**, an exploration, production, and pipeline company headquartered in Denver, Colorado, to implement a flexible program for 140 salaried employees. The flexible program offers choices in medical coverage, plus health and dependent care spending accounts. At the same time as the flexible implementation, the company introduced incentives for use of cost management features—including precertification of hospital stays, second surgical opinions, and a PPO alternative.

Notes Becky Milligan, Manager of Human Resources and Administration: "Through the program, we're sharing more responsibility for health care costs with employees, without mandating any particular plan. Instead, we're offering employees the ability to choose how to spend their health care dollars. Our employees are responding well as witnessed by our 38% enrollment in the health and 7% enrollment in the dependent care spending accounts."

Honolulu-based **Pacific Resources, Inc.** with 1,000 employees operates in two distinct businesses—as an independent refiner and marketer of petroleum and a gas utility company. Similarly, the company has two relatively distinct demographic groups—one featuring longer-service employees, the other younger, shorter-service employees. "A flexible program enables us to offer an array of benefit choices to appeal to our employees' wide-ranging needs," explains Mel Nakamura, Vice President of Human Resources. "In addition, the company seeks to manage escalating benefit costs through the new program."

The flexible program offers options in medical, dental, and vision coverage; life and AD&D; long-term disability; plus health and dependent care spending accounts. "Our employees have reacted very positively to the opportunity to choose the level of benefits they need," notes Mr. Nakamura.

This year, the company maintained the same level of cost commitment to benefits, but anticipates that price tags will inflate realistically over time. "Given the realities within our industry, a flexible approach provided us a reasonable means of introducing cost sharing in the future," explains Mr. Nakamura. "As employees are asked to pay for a portion of benefit cost increases, they may choose whether they want to spend more for higher coverages or opt down to lower levels."

Texas Eastern Corporation, a diversified energy company based in Houston, began thinking about implementing a flexible program several years ago. "We were encouraged by the many companies we saw moving over to flexible programs, but we felt employees would be better served by waiting for the certainty provided in the 1986 Tax Reform Act," explains Lance Froelich, Director of Compensation.

The company introduced two new flexible programs—one for about 3,500 Texas Eastern employees and one for 3,500 employees of Petrolane Partners, L.P. (whose benefits are managed by Texas Eastern as general partner). Although the plans vary because of differences in the nature of each company's workforce, both offer choices in medical, group life, and long-term disability, plus health and dependent care spending accounts.

United Gas Pipe Line Company, a Houston-based natural gas transmission company is phasing in benefit choicemaking for its 1,900 employees over a three-year period. This year, the company introduced choices in the areas of medical and dental, in addition to health and dependent care spending accounts. During the next two years, the company plans to add choices in other benefit areas—including group life, AD&D, disability, and possibly vacation.

Alvin White, Vice President, Human Resources and Administration, explains why management decided to implement the flexible program on an evolutionary basis: "Our organization, which went private in 1987, previously had gone through several changes in ownership. Although the introduction of a flexible program was positive news, employees had experienced so many changes in recent years that we wanted to make the transition to flexible benefits as comfortable as possible. We thought a phased approach would demonstrate greater sensitivity toward our employees than an all-at-once implementation."

▪ **Services**

Arthur Young & Company, headquartered in New York City, introduced a flexible program to meet the needs of a changing employee population. Explains Paul Ostling, National Director of Human Resources: "Perhaps few industries have experienced the dramatic shifts in demographics that have occurred within the accounting field. For example, over 50% of our workforce is single, and half of all professionals we now hire are women. The 'cookie cutter' mold for which our original program was designed no longer fits the needs of the majority of our people."

The flexible program offers six choices in medical and four tiers of coverage within each choice. "We have a larger number of employees who are single parents and we wanted to meet their special circumstances by adding a new coverage tier that differentiates from employee-plus-family coverage," explains Mr. Ostling. The program also offers a "yes/no" choice in dental (a new benefit area) and in long-term disability; seven choices in employee life and AD&D; and four in dependent life; plus health and dependent care spending accounts.

"We intentionally did not replicate our former coverages so that employees had to evaluate their choices," notes Mr. Ostling. "A flexible approach provided us an effective way to increase awareness among employees of the cost and usefulness of benefits."

■ Education

The **University of Puget Sound** located in Tacoma, Washington, designed a flexible program that offers choices in medical and dental, plus health and dependent care spending accounts. "We knew that understanding the needs and attitudes of our population would be important to the success of our program. By assembling a study group with members representing faculty and staff, we gained valuable input that was instrumental in the way we communicated the new benefit program," explains Rosa Beth Gibson, Personnel Director. "In terms of communication, we found that both faculty and staff preferred a straightforward, factual information approach, so we stayed away from frills—not even designating a special name for the new program."

■ Nonprofit

Concern about employee reaction initially posed a hurdle to introduction of a flexible program at **Applied Physics Laboratory**, the research and development division of The Johns Hopkins University in Laurel, Maryland. "Historically, our employees have not accepted change easily—particularly where finances are concerned," comments Patrick Birck, Compensation Manager. "So our communication effort needed to convince employees of the merits of a choicemaking program. Once we explained that a flexible program actually increases the efficiency of benefit expenditures, our employees became very receptive to the idea."

Employee understanding seems to be evidenced by spending account participation which was relatively high for a first-year program. About 33% of employees contributed to health care spending accounts (with an average contribution of \$600), while about 3% of employees established dependent care spending accounts (with an average contribution of \$2,700).

Viewpoint

Before the circumstances that led to defeat of the \$500 cap on flexible programs fade from memory, it may be helpful to try to identify the government concerns that caused the proposal to surface in the first place.

Somehow Washington policymakers have come to believe that tax avoidance is the key motivation for the spread of flexible compensation programs. Most likely, it is salary reduction that gives rise to the concern (because salary reduction turns currently taxable income into nontaxable compensation when that amount is spent on benefits). In reality, except for that feature, flexible programs have the opposite effect—turning unneeded, nontaxable benefit

money into taxable compensation (for programs with a cash option). Moreover, companies clearly are deeply involved in providing employee benefit protection to their employees through flexible programs (as much so as non-flexible program employers). So the concern about employers shirking responsibility for benefit provision by shifting the burden of payment to employees through salary reduction is misplaced. However, until Washington understands the workings of flexible programs, there may be continuing attempts to single out these benefit arrangements from all others for special punitive action.

In our perspective, it makes more sense to have one set of rules for all benefits—flexible and nonflexible. The basis for our reasoning is simple: Why should tax treatment differ by whether the employer makes the decision on how to spend benefit money, or the individual so decides? Surely the new discrimination rules (in all their complexity) will keep flexible programs from achieving tax avoidance for the highly paid while the lower paid select (taxable) cash. In the face of a renewed threat in the future, we trust that the power of reason will once again prevail against any special limitations for flexible programs alone.



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